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Anatomy of human rights violations at the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands

Saleh Shahriar ^a, Lu Qian^b and Sokvibol Kea ^c

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors affecting the violations of human rights at the borderlands between Bangladesh and India. It sheds a new light on the question: What are the main reasons behind the border killings between Bangladesh and India? Based on both official data and a field survey, it is argued that the issue of border killings is a gross violation of human rights. This study provides Bangladeshi perspectives on the issue of border killings and deaths. A section of India's Border Security Force (BSF) is the main violator of human rights at the borderlands between the two countries. The continued culture of border killings hampers the bilateral relationships between India and Bangladesh by creating a climate of fear and mutual mistrust. A conceptual framework is proposed to provide a deeper understanding of border killings. The findings reveal the nature and causes of killings of Bangladeshi people by India's BSF. Cross-border migrations, illicit economic activities, the Indian fence scheme, border disputes and the BSF's 'shoot-to-kill' policies are, among other factors, principal reasons for border killings. This empirical analysis of Indo-Bangladesh border killings might contribute to the development of a border theory.

KEYWORDS

border killings; cross-border issues; Indian Border Security Force (BSF); Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB); human rights violations; Bangladesh; India

HISTORY Received 19 April 2018; in revised form 10 January 2019


INTRODUCTION

International borders are ubiquitous; they span all over the world and are a fundamental element of security, economy, identity and geopolitics. There has been a 'renewed interest' and 'renaissance of border studies' over the past few decades (Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Cassarino, 2017; Newman, 2011; Paasi, 2012; Rumford, 2006). Border studies has become an interdisciplinary field with changing perspectives and theoretical approaches (Kolossoy, 2012; Naples, 2010). This interdisciplinary and multiperspectival study of borders is commonly known as 'critical border studies' (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2014). There are more types of border today than ever before in history (Nail, 2016) and in turn border crossings and deaths have become a global phenomenon. The Death at the Border Database reveals that 3188 people trying to reach Europe were found


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dead between 1990 and 2013 (Last et al., 2017) and such deaths at borders have been termed ‘a shame for Europe’ (Van Houtum & Boedeltje, 2009).

Borders have both symbolic and functional importance. They shape local trading networks and patterns of agglomeration, which in turn structure economic activities and trade (Carter & Goemans, 2018). The acceleration of globalization of the world economy has led to the generation of cross-border integrations (Sohn, 2014; Van Houtum & Strüver, 2010). Cross-border cooperation and conflicts are therefore two sides of the same coin. It remains important to understand why states build borders, walls or fences. According to an estimate, of 62 human-made border walls constructed since 1800, 28 have been constructed since 2000 (Carter & Poast, 2015). This reflects the manifestation of increasing global security concerns and perceptions of multiple threats. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent ‘global war on terrorism’ have had an enormous impact on global border regimes, surveillance practices and overall directions in border research (Andreas, 2003; Jones, 2012; Popescu, 2011).

Bangladesh has a long border of more than 4000 km with India. In Bangladesh, 170 million people live in 14.4 million hectares of land. It is one of the most densely populated countries in the world with a total area of 147,570 km², a population density of 1062.5/km² and total cultivable land of 8.29 million hectares (Hasan, Deng, Li, & Chen, 2017). The population is likely to reach 217.54 million by 2050 (BBS, 2018). On the one hand, this rapid population growth puts enormous pressure on the limited land resources and agriculture. On the other, the Indian government’s obsession with maintaining a balance of populations in its seven peripheral North-eastern states is reflected in its ‘mystery of the numbers game’ (Samaddar, 1999). The extra-judicial killings of Bangladeshi citizens by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) is a bone of contention and controversy between Bangladesh and India (Ranjan, 2016). The Indo-Bangladesh border is recognized as a ‘killer border’ (Van Schendel, 2005) as well as the ‘deadliest’ border in the world (Percot, 2018). An observer alleges that ‘A single killing by US law enforcement along the Mexican border makes headlines. The killing of large numbers of villagers by [the] Indian force has been almost entirely ignored’ (Adams, 2011).

Our current ability to explain why border killings break out between Bangladesh and India is severely limited. We are, therefore, motivated to fill the existing research gap. This work is about the killings and deaths of Bangladeshi citizens at the borderlands, and we offer the Bangladeshi perspectives on them. The paper is organized as follows. The next section elucidates the relevance of the study by explaining what this research adds to the larger literature on borders, border killings and human rights. In this way, we not only add a new empirical case but also address broader issues. A framework is proposed in the third section to illustrate the dynamics of border killings. The fourth section details the sources of the data and research methods. The results and discussions are presented in the fifth section before conclusions are finally offered.

CONTEXTUALIZING GLOBAL BORDER ISSUES AND THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The terms ‘borders’, ‘boundaries’, ‘frontiers’ and ‘borderlands’ are all political terminologies used in the literature to describe divisions between sovereign nations as determined by international agreements (Brunet-Jailly, 2005). A border is defined as ‘a process of social division’ (Nail, 2016, p. 2). Agnew (2008) views the border from a different perspective. To him, borders are ‘artifacts of dominant discursive processes that have led to the fencing off of chunks of territory and people from one another’ (p. 1). Also, Agnew problematizes the global nationalist discourses, as he observes, ‘There can be no nation without borders; the former follows the later’ (Agnew, 2009, p. 67). Borders are not just territorial lines, they are institutions and discourses (Brunet-Jailly, 2011; Schultz, 2015). As an economist defined: ‘Institutions are the rules of the game in a society

or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraint that shape human interaction' (North, 1990, p. 3). It is argued that 'borders manifest themselves in innumerable ways in daily lives and state-related practices and in institutions such as language, culture, myths, heritage, politics, legislation and economy' (Johnson et al., 2011, p. 62). Here, we observe a similarity in cognitive theoretical development to border studies; that is, Migdal (2004) used the term 'mental maps' (p. 7); North (2016) spoke of 'mental models' (p. 73); and Agnew (2008) framed as 'borders on the mind'. Borders have become increasingly complex and multifaceted in the contemporary world. As one scholar (Paasi, 1998, 2011) argues, it is an 'unattainable dream' to have a border theory as a border is contextual, relational and diverse. Van Houtum (2000) identified three dominant theoretical approaches – flows, people and cross-border economic cooperation – to study the border regions. In order to capture complex interactions and border situations, Martinez (1994) developed a well-known typology of alienated, coexistent, interdependent and integrated borderlands.

International borders are dynamic and human constructs (Hataley & Leuprecht, 2018). Borders determine the relationships between neighbouring countries and security outcomes as well as trade and population mobility (Ullah & Kumpoh, 2018). In larger theoretical literature, the two competing theses of border studies, among all others, are prominent: first, the 'borders are everywhere' thesis; and second, the 'borderless world' thesis. There are arguments and counterarguments for and against the twin schools of thought (Newman, 2006; Paasi, 2009). All types of border practices, both obvious and subtle, have two basic dimensions: mental maps and virtual checkpoints. Mental maps consist of the elements of emotions, passions, loyalties, affinities, cognitions and collective memories (Migdal, 2004). The 1986 publication of the *Journal of Borderland Studies* paved the way for border studies as a separate field of inquiry. Since then, the US–Mexico borderlands have received considerable research attention across the world (Ganster & Lorey, 2008; Hansen, 1981; Heyman, 2012; López, 2018; Trevino and Genna, 2017).

The borders in South Asia have also received increased attention in the past 10 years (Jones & Ferdoush, 2018). Of special instances in the areas of violent borders are the Israeli–Palestine (Griffiths & Repo, 2018; Kilroy, 2006), Indo–Pakistani (Behera, 2016; Mathur, 2012) and Thai–Cambodian (Jenne, 2017). The killings of Rohingya people have become a textbook example of human rights violations in 'Myanmar's bloody borders' (Beehner, 2018, p. 1).

Indo-Bangladesh border killings and human rights

Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971 through a bloody war of liberation. India played a major role in the liberation movements of Bangladesh. Since 1971, Bangladesh–India relations have experienced ups and downs. Bangladesh's foreign policy in the past four decades can be seen in a binary fashion: pro- or anti-India (Chakma, 2015). Over the past 18 years (2000–17), India's BSF members have killed a total of 1133 Bangladeshi citizens at the borderlands (Table 1). Members of the BSF are described by local residents as 'unsympathetic, aggressive and violent' (Human Rights Watch, 2010). By 'border killings', this study refers to the Bangladeshi citizens killed as a result of shooting by the BSF at Bangladesh's borderlands. The scope of the paper is limited to a period of three years, 2007–09. The overall analysis will focus on a timeframe of 18 years, 2000–2017. This period is chosen on the chief consideration of data availability.

The issue of Indo-Bangladesh border killings is a major obstacle to human rights and development. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that:

- Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.
- Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.
- Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Table 1. Nature of Indo-Bangladesh border killings and violence, 2000–17.

Year	Killed	Injured	Abducted ^a	Missing	Raped	Snatched	Pushed in	Other	Total
2017	25	39	28	0	0	0	0	0	92
2016	29	36	22	0	0	0	0	0	87
2015	44	60	27	1	0	0	0	0	132
2014	35	68	99	2	0	0	0	5	209
2013	29	79	127	0	1	77	41	0	354
2012	38	100	74	1	0	9	0	16	238
2011	31	62	23	0	0	0	0	9	125
2010	74	72	43	2	0	1	5	0	197
2009	98	77	25	13	1	1	90	3	308
2008	61	46	81	0	0	3	20	0	211
2007	118	82	92	9	3	5	198	0	507
2006	155	121	160	32	2	9	0	0	479
2005	88	53	78	14	3	4	0	0	240
2004	72	30	73	0	0	5	0	0	180
2003	27	41	120	7	2	8	0	0	205
2002	94	42	118	30	0	12	0	0	296
2001	84	29	55	0	1	10	0	0	179
2000	31	17	106	0	2	13	0	0	169
Total	1133	1054	1351	111	15	157	354	33	4208

Note: ^aIn 2013, among 31 abducted persons 10 persons returned.

Sources: Odhikar (2018), a human rights organization in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Table 2. Spatial distributions of Indo-Bangladesh border killings and violence, 2011–14.

Division	Year	Nature of the violence					Total
		Death (shooting)	Death by physical torture	Injured	Kidnapped	Return after abduction	Reason not mentioned (death)
Dhaka	2011				2		2
	2012	1	1		4	1	7
	2013			1	3	15	0
	2014				1	6	7
Chittagong	2011						0
	2012						0
	2013	0	0	0	4	7	0
	2014						0
Rajshahi	2011	14	9	32	22	17	1
	2012	4	6	23	38	2	
	2013	2	1	3	7	41	3
	2014	3	5	8	22	1	
Khulna	2011	7	7	28	3	2	
	2012	7	6	33	36	10	
	2013	4	0	6	17	52	12
	2014	7	8	17	25	15	
Sylhet	2011	2		4	3	2	
	2012			13	13	8	
	2013	0	0	1	1	6	6
	2014			2	18	7	
Rangpur	2011						0
	2012	13	10	37	49	4	
	2013	6	0	4	58	69	6
	2014	6	3	36	44	38	1
Total		76	53	248	370	303	28

Source: Authors' compilation using data collected from the 'Ain O Shalish Kendro' in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Sen (2004) argues that human rights are important for economic and social freedoms. The essence of human rights is to secure the freedom, well-being and dignity of all people everywhere (UNDP, 2000). The protection of human life from unusual demise, fear, torture, poverty and deprivation is the root of the 'individual human security' paradigm (King & Murray, 2001–02). At present, the challenge of the state is to implement human rights protections (Hitchcock, 2015).

Table 1 reveals the several forms of borderland human rights violations. In terms of spatial patterns of violence, as shown in Table 2, border crimes are prevalent in all six divisions, the highest administrative units in Bangladesh which are in turn composed of 64 districts. For focus and brevity, this paper will deal with only one form of human rights abuse: border killings.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We use the notion of 'death at the margins', proposed by Sidaway (2015), to illustrate the state of the border as method. A conceptual framework is proposed to illustrate the interrelated dynamics of Indo-Bangladesh border killings. Figure 1 shows that death at the margins is a function of Indo-Bangladesh border disputes, the BSF's strategy of shooting, the illicit border economy, Indian fencing and cross-border population movements. This framework differs from that of Sidaway in a couple of ways. First, the way we incorporated some relevant concepts from the literature is novel in making conceptual linkages between border studies, border killings and human rights. Second, the main focus of the framework is placed on the issue of border killings; whereas Sidaway's framework includes a broad range of issues such as: border walls, partition studies, bibliometric borders, imperial frontiers, border cultures, border demarcation, cross-border cooperation and planetary boundaries. Sidaway is more interested in engaging with Anglo-American and European perspectives of borders rather than with the South Asian literature. The explanations for inclusion of a plethora of concepts are provided below:

- **Death at the margins:** Sidaway (2015, p. 219) refers to the brutalities of 'killing, detention and dehumanization' as 'border killings'. The central focus of this paper is the issue of border killings at the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands. This notion of 'death at the margins' is intended to place margins at the centre of critical border studies. This is a concept referring to the scale and seriousness of deaths and killings at the borderlands, which is at the centre of critical border studies. Borders and margins are central to understanding South Asian history and politics. To call borderlands 'margins' has become, in recent years, academic common sense (Cons & Sanyal, 2013). In short, the act of border killings could be defined as a process of

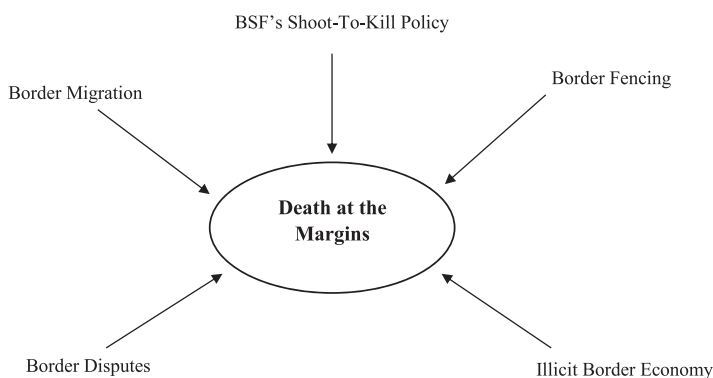


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for understanding Indo-Bangladesh border killings and deaths. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

- dehumanization, marginalization and underdevelopment. Between 2002 and 2014, the estimated number of deaths at the European Union borders was 22,400 (Kovras & Robins, 2016); and more than 40,000 people died attempting to cross a border from 2006 to 2015 (Jones et al., 2017). The distinguishing feature of these deaths is that they occur at the borders.
- Border migration: unauthorized migration has been an issue of great debate for decades. This is evident in the publication of a large literature on the topic (Donato & Armenta, 2011). Cross-border migration along the Indo-Bangladesh border is documented elsewhere (Ghosh, 2013; Samaddar, 1999).
 - Fencing: the making of fences or walls is responsible for creating an 'us' and an 'other' (Newman & Paasi, 1998). In this regard, the border can be regarded as a political tool for the maintenance of national security, sovereignty and identity.
 - Illicit economy: the illicit economy is pervasive in different borderlands. Cross-border drug lords, ethnic groups, sex workers, smugglers, migrant workers, illegal traders, insurgents and religious extremists constitute some sorts of partnerships of conveniences. Bangladesh and India have a vibrant illicit and informal cross-border economic relationship (Das, 2014; Sarkar, 2016).
 - The BSF's shoot-to-kill policy: many Bangladeshi citizens living at the borders are victims of the BSF's shoot-to-kill policy. Research indicates that Indian forces at the Bangladesh border constitute a 'shoot to kill policy' (Öztiğ, 2013).
 - Border disputes: this refers to a violent or non-violent conflict between two primary antagonists over the demarcation of their shared borderlands (Mandel, 1980). The presence of natural resources, geostrategic considerations, state weakness or competing historical border precedents could be the sources of conflicts and war (Abramson & Carter, 2016; Atzili, 2007). In countries across the globe, there are overlapping claims in borders. One notable instance is the case of the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands (Hossain, 1981; Ranjan, 2018). Almost 6.5 km of Indo-Bangladesh's land border still remain undemarcated (Bhardwaj, 2016).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Secondary data

We compiled a data set of 278 Bangladeshi citizens killed at the Indo-Bangladesh border in three consecutive years, 2007, 2008 and 2009. The deceased persons' data on the various factors – their name, age, date of killing, border district, place of the incident – were collected from a Human Rights Watch report entitled *'Trigger Happy': Excessive Use of Force by Indian Troops at the Bangladesh Border* (2010, pp. 61–74). Time-series data were also collected from a Bangladesh-based national human rights organization called Odhikar (www.odhikar.org). At the same time, we compared and cross-checked the data collected from a legal aid and human rights organization called Ain O Shalish Kendro (www.askbd.org). We could not get access to Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) administrative data. One probable reason is that Indo-Bangladesh border are considered as 'sensitive spaces' (Cons, 2016).

Primary data

Pilot study

In Bangladesh, a pilot study was carried out in the north-western border belt of Dinajpur and Kurigram under the division of greater Rangpur. A total of 10 experienced border citizens, who have lived for more than 60 years at the borderlands, were interviewed as a first step to obtain some narratives about the borderlands. In the second step, we interviewed 10 persons at Bongo Sonarhat of Kurigram district. Those preliminary interview results contributed to the design of the questionnaire, which was written in Bangla. The responses were later translated into English.

Although most of the questions were closed, there were some open-ended questions. Including the first author, the research team was composed of five university graduates who had formal training on survey methodology. The first author worked closely to ensure the quality of the data. The research team members were aware of the ‘guidelines for asking questions’ suggested by a methodology expert (Babbie, 2007, pp. 245–260).

Survey

In January–February 2015, we twice visited Dashiari Chora, an Indian border enclave situated at the northern border district of Kurigram in Bangladesh. Dashiari Chora was selected for a few reasons. First, it was the largest Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Second, the enclave was situated in Phulbari where the brutal incident of the killing of Felani Khatun took place. There have been many instances when people crossing the border have been fired upon and killed: one such example is the killing of 15-year-old Felani Khatun in September 2011 by Amiya Ghosh, an Indian border force constable. He shot her dead at the India–Bangladesh border and, after protests in both India and Bangladesh, he was arrested, but acquitted in 2013 (Ranjan, 2016). After the girl was killed, her body was hung on the barbed wire separating the India and Bangladesh sides of the border. This brutality was challenged by the Bangladesh government. As a result, in September 2015, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India asked the Indian government to pay Rs500,000 in compensation to the family of Felani. However, the Indian BSF member was not punished for the killing and was released from court. The parents of Felani and the Bangladesh authority refused to accept the court verdict.

First-hand knowledge and experience gained from the interactions and observations are used in this paper. The interviews were conducted in July–September 2016 with 135 randomly selected border residents using the finalized questionnaire. The questionnaire sample was drawn randomly from five *upazila* (sub-units) belonging to three border districts, Dinajpur, Kurigram and

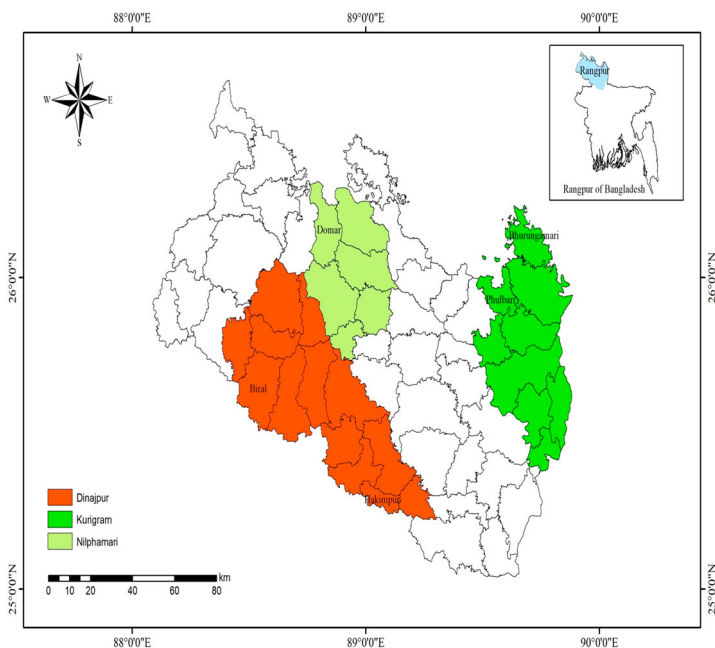


Figure 2. Location of the study areas in Bangladesh. Source: Authors' own mapping using the ArcGIS version 10.2.2.

Table 3. Specification of the study areas and data-collection strategies.

Districts	Upazila	Fields	Data-collection methods
Dinajpur	Biral	Bhandara, Pakura, Khobra, Bijora, Dungdungi, Kaliganj	Survey and observations
	Hakimpur	Hili land border port area	
Kurigram	Bhurungamari	Bongo Sonarhat, Banurkuti Purbo Gayabari, Banurkuti	Survey and key informants' interviewing
		Choruahallah, Tilai Purbopara, Maynatola, Char	
		Bhurungamari, Vowelkuri	
Nilphamari	Phulbari	Dashiar Chora	Survey and informal discussions
	Domar	Chilahati, Ketokibari, Sarkar Para, Patowari Para, BOP Para, Thatari Para, Girar Danga, Golabari, Purbo Bhogdabari	

Nilphamari, in Rangpur division. A total of 75, 30 and 30 questionnaires were distributed at each location respectively. We selected only the *upazila* adjacent to the border and borderlands. The details of the study sites and methods are shown in Figure 2 and Table 3. The aim of the study was explained to the respondents, and then interviews were conducted with their informed verbal consents. In addition to the structured interviews, we conducted informal discussions with some key informants. The research team followed a flexible method of interactive interviews and group discussions at the borderland's shops and tea stalls. We maintained diaries to write down useful notes and observations.

Limitations

There are several important limitations to the current data. The lack of information on all the persons who were killed is a serious weakness in the data set. Globally, there are no government or official source of data on border-related deaths. Some cases, therefore, remain 'unknown'. We could not collect the data of those 1133 persons killed because there are no more recent statistics. Therefore, we relied solely on our own data set of 278 persons killed in three consecutive years, 2007–09. In other words, the secondary data on the violent borders are relatively old compared with the primary survey data. We used data from the two different time periods mainly due to the unavailability of data in the public domain. In addition, we could not cover Bangladesh's south-east, north-east and south-western borderlands due to time and financial constraints.

On 25–26 February 2009, 74 people, including 57 army officers of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), were brutally killed in a revolt by a group of BDR personnel against high-ranking officers at the force's headquarters at Pilkhana, Dhaka, in Bangladesh. This incident caused a sense of insecurity and fear among the border guards (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) was renamed the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) in 2009 after the February mutiny. In that context, it was difficult to interview members of the BGB.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics

The data collected were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 20. Figure 3 illustrates that Bangladeshi people were killed in every month of the three years under scrutiny. In 2007, 120 persons were killed by the BSF. In 2008 and 2009, the numbers of persons killed were 62 and 96 respectively. Sur (2013, p. 76) reported that:

Torture and cross-border killings were not rumours in remote locations or hollow warnings to borderlanders and researchers alike to ‘stay off’ the border zone. Between 2000 and 2010, more than 932 Bangladeshi undocumented border-crossers were killed by Indian border guards.

Table 4 presents the profile of 135 respondents from Bangladesh’s three north-western border districts of Dinajpur, Kurigram and Nilphamari. The statistical properties of the data reveal some interesting information. First, more than 70% of the respondents were male. This is in line with the patriarchal and conservative character of Bangladesh society as a whole. Second, around 60% of the respondents are young, aged 18–30 years. The presence of a relatively high percentage of young people is a reflection of a new reality in Bangladesh – a lower middle-income country with ‘demographic dividend’ (Islam, 2016).

Table 5 shows that the majority of the deceased (66%) were in their 20s and 30s. An absolute majority of them (92.4%) were male. A total of 16 children (5.8%), aged below 19 years, were killed at the border. The over-representation of males is consistent with the findings of a previous study elsewhere, which reported that in each year between 1993 and 1997, 85% (874 of 1034) of deceased migrants at the US–Mexico border were male (Eschbach, Hagan, Rodriguez, Hernandez-Leon, & Bailey, 1999). The age and sex composition of the people killed reflects the different age–sex categories and differences in risk-taking behaviour by age and by sex. The large number of cases without reported age and sex reflect the number of bodies found at the border that were unidentified, and therefore remained ‘unknown’. Moreover, serial numbers from 1 to 10 in the first column of Table 6 show that more than 86% (240 of 278) of people were killed at only 10 Bangladeshi border districts. A total of 28 of the 64 districts of Bangladesh have borders with India. Out of 64, a total of 23 districts (26%) are vulnerable to border killings.

Empirical findings

Figure 4 captures the views of our respondents regarding the reasons for violence at the Indo–Bangladesh border. It shows that more than 50% (54) of the respondents consider India’s ‘shoot-to-kill policy’ as the single greatest reason for violent border regimes. Illegal border trade (14) and border crossings (10) are respectively the second and third major reasons for border violence. This indicates that border crossings have become relatively difficult after the construction of fences. Out of 135, as highlighted in Figure 5, 80 respondents identified ‘shooting’ as the

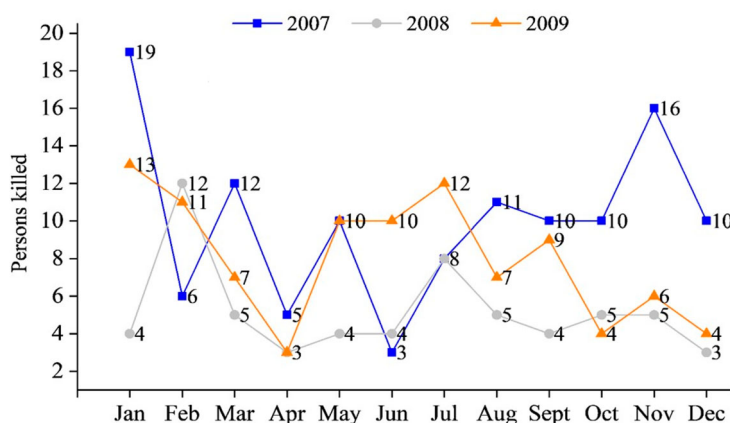


Figure 3. Statistics of border killings, 2007–09. Source: Data compiled by the authors using the Origin 2018b version 9.5.

Table 4. Summary statistics of the respondents.

Indicators		Respondents	%
Sex	Male	95	70.37
	Female	40	29.63
Marital status	Single	52	38.52
	Married	83	61.48
Age (years)	18–30	80	59.26
	31–45	30	22.22
	> 45	25	18.52
Education	Secondary school	35	25.93
	Higher secondary school	25	18.52
	Graduate	20	14.81
	Postgraduate/master's degree	15	11.11
	Illiterate	40	29.63
Occupation	Cross-border traders	50	37.04
	Teachers	10	7.41
	Rickshaw-pullers	12	8.89
	Cross-border labourers and farmers	20	14.81
	Lawyers	3	2.22
	Doctors/physicians	2	1.48
	Private job holders	30	22.22
	Religious leaders	8	5.93

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Table 5. Demographic characteristics of the deceased, 2007–09.

Characteristics	Frequency	%
<i>Age (years)</i>		
0–9	1	0.4
1–19	15	5.4
20–29	91	32.7
30–39	92	33.1
40–49	27	9.7
50–59	7	2.5
≥ 60	1	0.4
Unknown	44	15.8
Total	278	100
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	257	92.4
Female	2	0.7
Unknown	19	6.8
Total	278	100

Source: Authors' calculation.

Table 6. Number of deceased in Bangladesh's border districts, 2007–09.

Serial number	Districts	Number	%
1	Satkhira	53	19.06
2	Thakurgaon	39	14.03
3	Jessore	34	12.23
4	Dinajpur	20	7.19
5	Chapainababganj	19	6.83
6	Naogaon	19	6.83
7	Jhenaidah	18	6.47
8	Lalmonirhat	17	6.12
9	Chuadanga	12	4.32
10	Kurigram	9	3.24
11	Panchagar	9	3.24
12	Joypurhat	5	1.80
13	Meherpur	4	1.44
14	Moulavibazar	4	1.44
15	Sylhet	3	1.08
16	Kushtia	3	1.08
17	Rangpur	2	0.72
18	Sherpur	2	0.72
19	Comilla	2	0.72
20	Feni	1	0.36
21	Habiganj	1	0.36
22	Rajshahi	1	0.36
23	Sunamganj	1	0.36
Total		278	100.00

Source: Authors' calculation.

dominant method applied by the BSF. The prevalence of sexual harassments at the Indo-Bangladesh border led a scholar to term the borders as 'gendered landscapes' (Sur, 2012, p. 127).

The physical character of Indo-Bangladesh border is not uniform. Almost 6.5 km of common border remain undemarcated. A BSF member reports that there are 2853.50 acres of Indian land under the adverse possession of Bangladesh and 2154.50 acres of Bangladeshi land under the adverse possession of India (Jamwal, 2004). These complexities make the situation difficult, since the border management is 'corrupt and led by bureaucratic red tape and highhandedness. The Indo-Bangladesh border, though officially rigid, unofficially and illegally has been porous and easy to cross' (Chandran & Rajamohan, 2007, p. 121). Some respondents from the Hili land port border, Dinajpur, said:

The BGB members take money as bribe, and then issue the 'pass card' to cross the borders. We have to pay bribes to the linemen who are the small groups of local border people. The linemen have good working relationships with the border officers and staffs.

The 'linemen' at the Indo-Bangladesh border could be identified as the 'middlemen' or 'brokers' who have social networks, skills and capital. The 'linemen' or 'ghatmen' are locally known as *dalals*

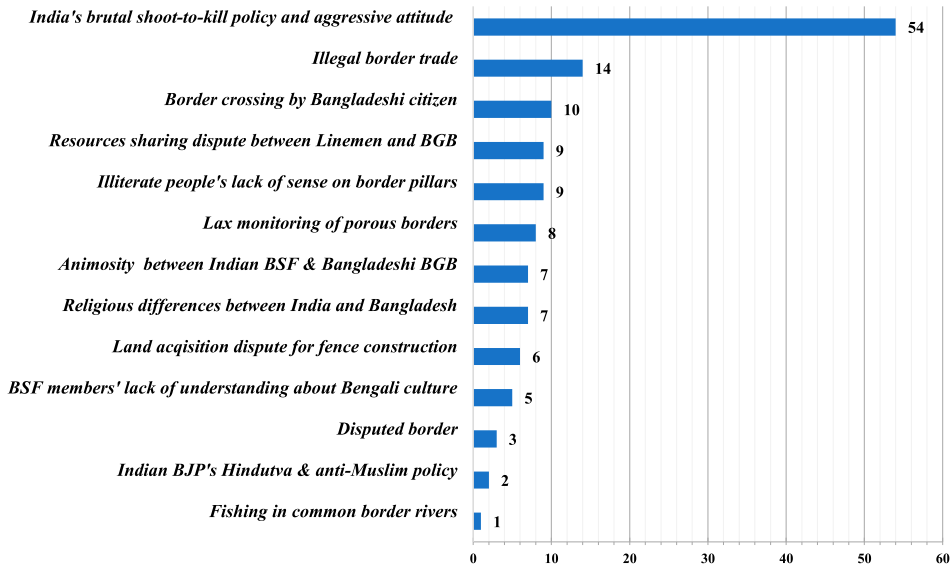


Figure 4. Reasons for border killings. Source: Field survey, 2016.

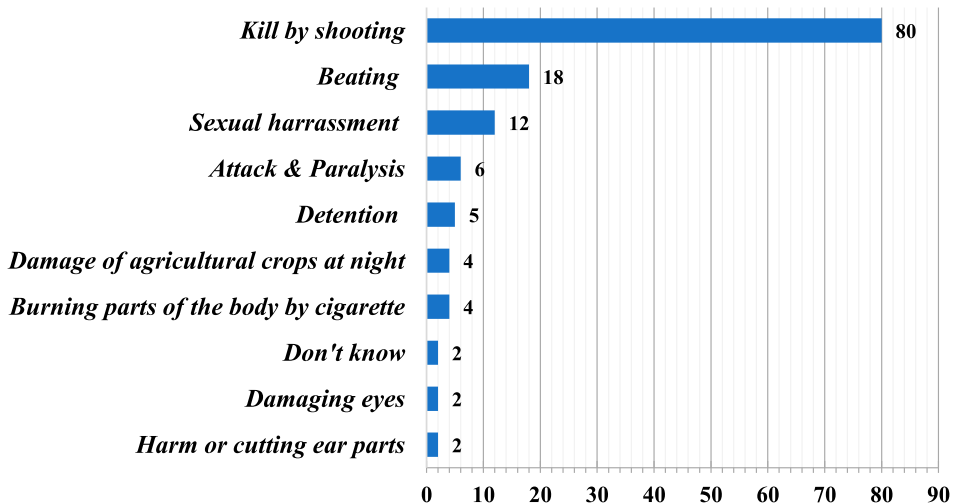


Figure 5. Indian BSF's techniques of human rights violence. Source: Field survey, 2016.

in Bangladesh (Percot, 2018). Shewly (2016) reports that an illicit economy has flourished under the cross-border brokers who cross the border to travel and work in Delhi, India. It would not be an exaggeration to argue that there is a 'triangular' partnership of convenience among a few members of the border forces, the linemen, and some local border residents. Baud and Schendel (1997, pp. 211–245) explored the dynamics of political consequences of the 'triangle of power relations' between state forces, regional elite and local people at the borderlands. Furthermore, the demarcation of the border in 1947 was flawed and faulty (Chester, 2008; Jones, 2014). A Bengal partition analyst explored the ambiguities of the Radcliffe Commission in greater detail (Chatterji, 1999). Sir Cyril Radcliffe was appointed as chairman of the 1947 boundary commission and assigned the task of border demarcation. He had no background in Indian administration, nor did he have any prior experience of adjudicating border disputes. By 17 August 1947, Radcliffe



Figure 6. Trade value between Bangladesh and India (US\$, millions). Source: Authors' own compilation based on the UNCOMTRADE database.

announced his award without proper discussion or consultation with the stakeholders involved. Hindu–Muslim riots became severe in the borderlands before and after partition. The case study of Bangladesh's tribal Garos borderland community depicts the painful and traumatic experiences of the partition (Bal & Chambugong, 2014).

Bangladesh is located at the heart of three drug-producing regions: in the east the Golden Triangle, in the north the Golden Wedge and in the west, across India, the Golden Crescent. An Indian analyst wrote: 'the border points of Petrapole-Benapole, Hilli-Hilli, Gede-Darsana, Dawki-Tamabil and Agartala-Akhura are the major points through which drugs are smuggled into Bangladesh' (Das, 2012, p. 33). Note that there is an increasing deficit in Indo-Bangladesh trade. Figure 6 shows a huge trade imbalance between Bangladesh and India. The average trade deficit, during 2000–15, stands at just under US\$2.335 billion. Overall, it is in India's favour.

It is crucial to minimize the trade deficit to curb illegal flows of goods along the border. Indo-Bangladesh cross-border cooperation is also essential for peace and development (Rahman, 2008). A Bangladeshi political scientist observed: 'Cooperation between the two countries is essential to eradicate poverty, illiteracy and to contain environment pollution, terrorism, drug trafficking, trafficking of women and children' (Chowdhury, 2013, p. 100).

The Indian side alleges that 'bottles of psychotropic cough syrup, cattle, drug and narcotics, small arms, onions, animal hides, gold and other precious metals, etc., travel across the borders posing a threat to India's security' (Das, 2014, p. 300). Prior work confirmed that smuggling is an important economic activity all along the Indo-Bangladesh border (Van Schendel, 1993). Figures 7 and 8 present the survey results of the commodities usually smuggled into and out of Bangladesh. Figure 8 reveals that illicit drugs, especially phensedil, are a problematic issue in Bangladesh. In an exclusive interview, the former director general of the BGB recognized the fact that illegal drug, especially phensedil, flows are a grave national problem (Ahmed, 2016). As illustrated in Figure 9, of the survey respondents, around 82.61% of unemployed youths and 28.21% of poor people are involved in illicit economic activities. Also, 4.44% women and 3.70% children are involved in illicit border trade respectively. The present survey, then, finds that women are engaged in cross-border illegal trade to a much lower degree than men. However, rural, illiterate and poor young girls and women are often trafficked with the help of local women.

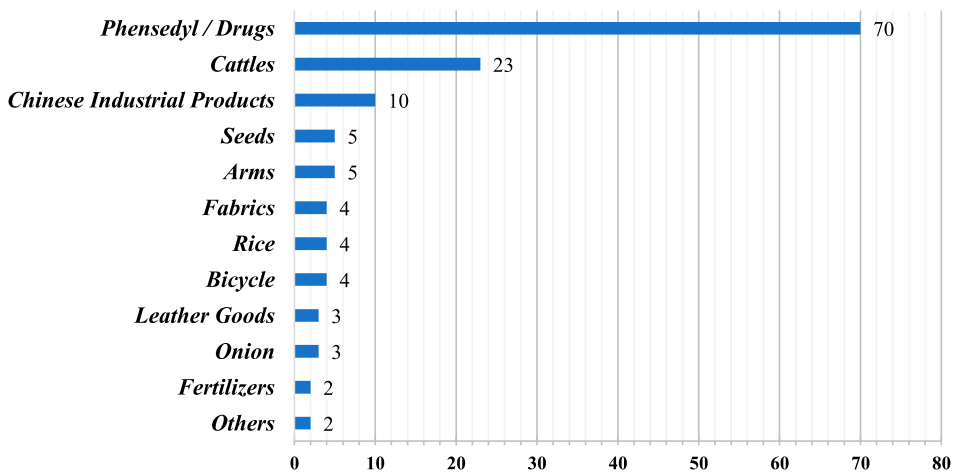


Figure 7. Commodities usually smuggled in. Source: Field survey, 2016.

Bangladesh is currently in a situation of economic growth without an expansion of jobs, a phenomenon known as ‘jobless growth’. As a result, the youth unemployment rate was 10.6% in 2017. The ‘youth bulge’ also gives rise to informal economic activities along the borders. Thus, informal cross-border trade is gender specific. In the fields of criminology, sociology and feminism, there is an unresolved debate about how gender deters or shapes crime (Kruttschnitt, 2013; Pickering & Cochrane, 2012).

It is estimated that 1.5 million cows, worth almost US\$500 million, are smuggled into Bangladesh annually (Rather, 2016). One possible explanation for border killings might be the Indian religious-cultural attitude towards cows as sacred animals. The rise of the Indian BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) to state power has further adversely affected the discourses of borderlands. The goal

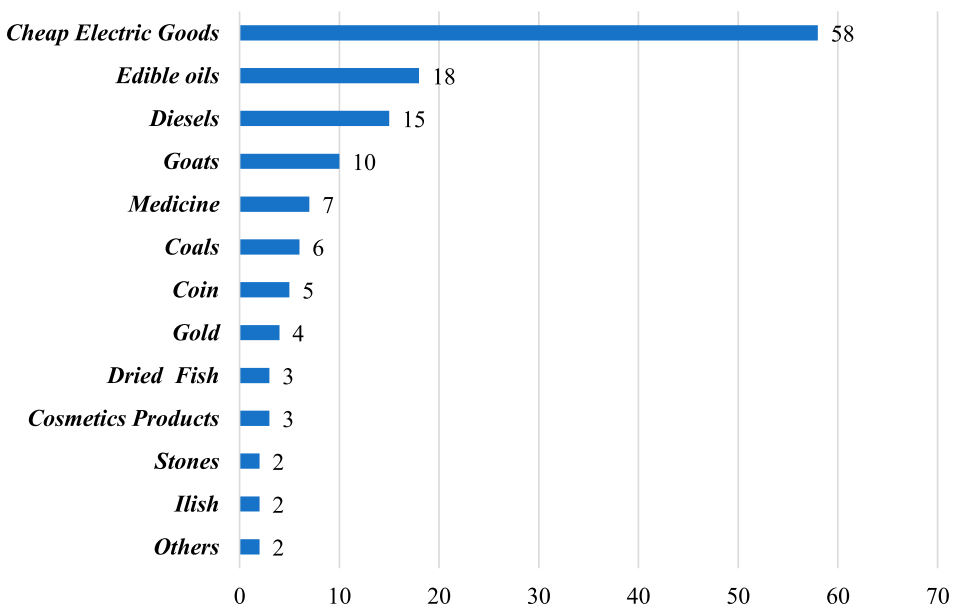


Figure 8. Commodities usually smuggled out. Source: Field survey, 2016.

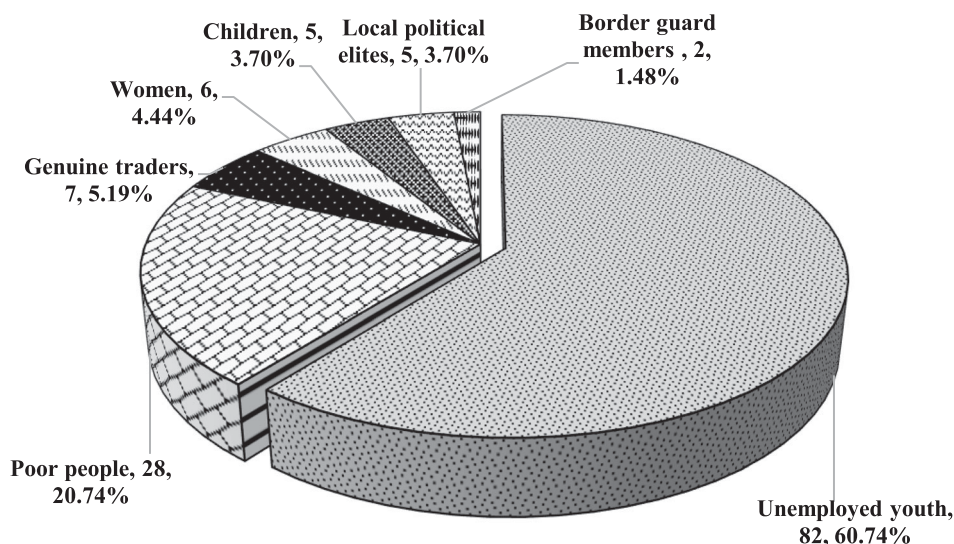


Figure 9. Respondents involved in cross-border illicit trade. Source: Field survey, 2016.

of the BJP is to make India a purely Hindu state based on the fundamentalist principles of Hinduism (Patil, 2017; Varshney, 2014). Ramachandran (1999) claims that undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh are increasingly viewed as a severe threat to the security and integrity of the Hindu nation. The leaders of the BJP often raise the presence of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), within the borders of Bangladesh. This represents the BJP's official stance towards Bangladesh (Singh, 2009). The discourse of cow protectionism is related to upper Hindu caste-dominant politics. A researcher explains: 'Right-wing Hindu political groups mobilize the ostensible sacrality of bovine bodies as a political tool to build an ideologically pure Hindu nation, constructing cow slaughter as a direct attack on Hindu nationhood and identity' (Narayanan, 2018, p. 331). One plausible explanation for the BSF's aggressive attitude could be related to the geopolitics of Bangladesh's borderlands. India often claims that Bangladesh is a haven for terrorist activities. Bangladesh's three mountainous ethnic border districts – Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachari – which make up the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), are insurgency prone. Bangladesh alleges that India provides logistical support to the insurgent ethnic groups for tactical gains (Rashiduzzaman, 1998). The issue of illegal border crossing remains 'a major bone of contention to this day with accounts of illegal Bangladeshi immigrations in India varying from an exaggerated 20 million to about 2 million' (Thakar, 2010, p. 68). Again, the electoral politics of the 'numbers game' remains a dominant factor in India's official estimation of illegal Bangladeshis, ranging from 10 million to 35 million (Rather, 2016). The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs explains:

In order to prevent illegal migration and illegal activities including anti-national activities from across the border, the Government of India had sanctioned the construction of border fencing with floodlights in two faces. The total length of Indo-Bangladesh border sanctioned for fencing is 3326.14 km; out of which about 2731 km of fencing has so far been completed up to 31st December 2016. (India, T. G. o, 2017, p. 37)

The details of the Indian border fencing plan are shown in Table 7.

Bangladesh's analysts are critical of the Indian fencing project (Kabir, 2005). India's fencing scheme itself is accused of a violation of land property rights, human necessities and 'basic

Table 7. Length of the Indian border fencing (km).

State	Phase I		Phase II		Total (Phase I + II)	
	Sanctioned	Completed	Sanctioned	Completed	Sanctioned	Completed
West Bengal	507.00	507.00	913.33	737.00	1420.33	1244
Assam	152.31	149.29	77.57	74.60	229.88	223.89
Meghalaya	198.06	198.06	263.20	150.44	461.26	348.50
Tripura	–	–	348.68	154.00	348.68	154.00
Mizoram	–	–	348.68	154.00	348.68	154.00
Total	857.37	854.35	2468.77	1877.04	3326.14	2731.39

Source: Authors' compilation from India, T. G. o (2017, p. 37).

citizenship rights' (Datta, 2018). The fencing is not along the international zero line and cuts through basic public facilities such as schools, temples, mosques and farmland (Banerjee & Chen, 2013). Following Nicol (2012), we argue that the meaning of fencing has been framed by specific geopolitical discourses over time and that its meaning has always been rationalized by nationalistic, securitized and hegemonic discourses. The fencing project is driven by the Indian elites' nationalist populist appeals characterized by the securitization discourses of detachment from Bangladeshi Muslims as well as cooperative attachment at the same time. McDuie-Ra (2014) shows the fencing is politicized and related to the narratives of anti-migration, national security and trade, appealing to Indian nationalism, Hindu nationalism and feelings of vulnerability.

Assam's anti-immigrant movement is an old problem. In the early months of 1983, for instance, 4000 people were massacred, one-quarter of a million were made homeless and thousands fled the state (Weiner, 1983). This is a controversial matter in the politics of Assam (Baruah, 2005; Krishan, 2001; Sharma, 2012). These controversies and concerns are reflected in the writings of Indian scholars, too. For instance, Majumdar (2014, p. 331) observes: 'The pattern of illegal migration and infiltration coupled with the suspicion that such infiltration covers the surreptitious and movement of smugglers and radical Islamist terrorists who sneak into India makes the Indian establishment worried.' Indian politicians blamed the 'illegal Bangladeshis' for the Hindu-Muslim conflicts that occurred in June 2012 when 40 people were killed and 170,000 displaced in the first week alone (Murshid, 2016). Due to the July 2018 move to form the National Register of Citizens (NRC), almost 4 million Bengali-origin Muslims have been deprived of citizenship and enlisted as 'foreigners', an initiative designed deliberately to make them 'stateless' (Bal, 2018). This initiative is antithetical to the principles of human rights.

Trafficking of women and children is widely observed along the shared borderlands (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2015; Kamler, 2015; Macklin, 2003). Approximately 4 million people are smuggled across borders every year (Adamson, 2006). In Bangladesh, women are marginalized in all spheres of public life. Around 32% of our respondents said there were public health risks of HIV/AIDs in Bangladesh because of the growth of the cross-border sex trade. According to an estimate, about 15,000 Bangladeshis are enticed annually out of the country by traffickers (Paul & Hasnat, 2000). Because of the vast and porous land border between Bangladesh and India, Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked to India. A large number of Bangladeshi women are involved in the sex trade in India, mostly in the brothels of Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi (Shewly, 2013). The contexts, methods and reasons for the violation of women's human rights in trafficking are explained elsewhere (Ghosh, 2015).

Bangladesh and India had been hosting 198 enclaves (Ferdoush, 2018). The incidence of human abuses in these enclaves is documented elsewhere (Chaki, 2016; Shewly, 2012; Younus, 2015). In 2015, the Indian and Bangladesh government concluded a land boundary agreement (LBA) that led to the exchange of 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India. However, the agreement did not produce the results expected in bringing about a change and improvements in the livelihoods of the border people. Our discussions with the border dwellers of an enclave, Dashiari Chora of Kurigram, reveal the marginalized and impoverished conditions of the people.

Figure 10 presents the interviewees' responses when asked about the reasons behind cross-border migration. A total of 39% of the respondent perceived this as due to border trade; 33% of respondents think it is due to ethno-social and family relationships; whereas 19% consider the existence of closer agricultural lands as the main reason for cross-border migration.

We asked the respondents questions about the impacts of border killings on inter-state relations and their daily lives as well. According to Figure 11, 31% of respondents (42) think that a climate of fear and distrust is created by the border killings. Also, 24% (32) and 15% (20) of interviewees identified border trade and Bangladesh's security, respectively, as threatening.

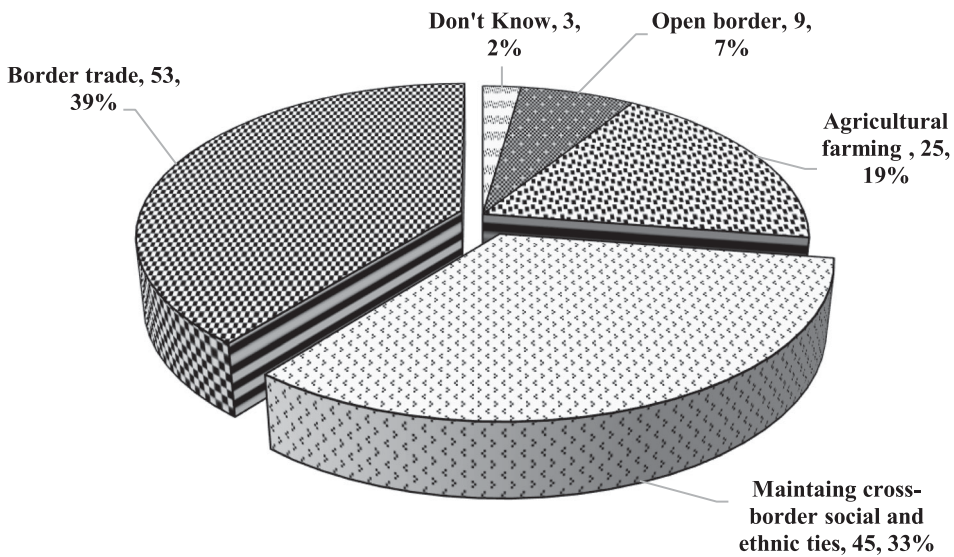


Figure 10. Reasons for illegal cross-border migrations. Source: Field survey, 2016.

Our findings are consistent with a previous field study conducted at a border village, located in the Greater Sylhet region of Bangladesh on the border with Assam. The field study revealed that the people at the borderlands are living in ‘fear of [the] BSF’ (Hölzle, 2017). The fear generated is often used for political gains (Enroth, 2017). Banerjee (2012) examined the nature of human rights violation at the West Bengal border districts of Nadia, Maldah and Murshidabad. There are instances of violence against women in the context of the barbed wire fencing at the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands (Begum, 2012).

We can briefly discuss Bangladeshi and Indian responses and responsibilities for human rights violation at the borders. It is observed that regular high-level meetings between the BSF and BGB are held to mitigate cross-border issues. The flag meetings between the two forces are organized in times of emergency situations (Sikri, 2009). Bangladesh and India are also implementing a Coordinated Border Management Plan to ‘identify vulnerable sectors and jointly patrol the border’ (Shringla, 2018, p. 528). Both countries have established an India–Bangladesh Joint Consultative Commission at the level of the foreign ministries, set up a regular dialogue mechanism at the home-minister level, and signed an extradition treaty to prevent criminal elements talking

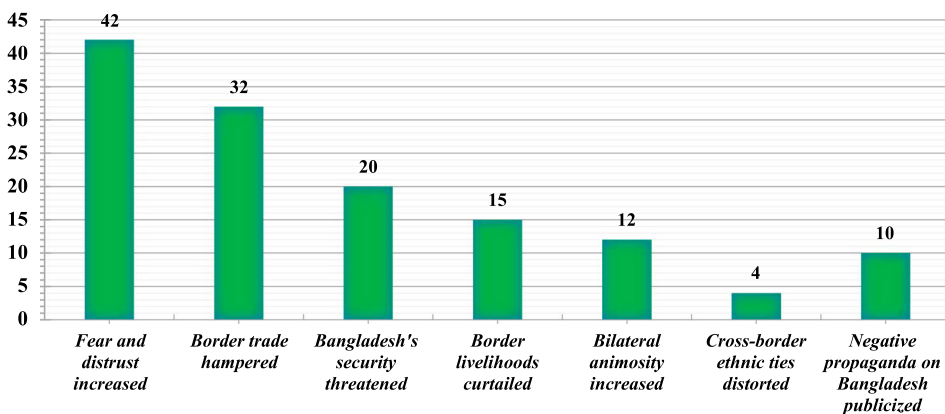


Figure 11. Impact of border killings on bilateral relations and border life. Source: Field survey, 2016.

advantage of the porous border (Shringla, 2018). Furthermore, India has set up a new administrative body, the Department of Border Management, and initiated the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) to improve the quality of life and livelihoods for those living at the border.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that border killings have become a serious form of human rights violation at the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands. The issue of border killings is one of the most fundamental problems hindering the healthy development of bilateral relations. The overall human rights situation at the borderlands, therefore, needs to be improved. In line with the research question and purpose, the present study reveals that several factors – the illicit border economy, migration, fencing, border disputes and the BSF's 'shoot-to-kill' policy – contribute to the problem of border killings. The main contributions of this paper are, however, twofold. First, it fills the research vacuum on the longstanding problem of border killings along the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands. Second, it details the perspectives and insights from the borderlands, and thereby presents a new empirical case on the subject of violent borders. This research would, therefore, be useful for 'the synthesis of border-related knowledge and advancement of theoretical concepts for use in classification and understanding of border dynamics around the globe' (Stoddard, 1986, p. 17). Further research is strongly recommended in order to focus on the relative significance of each factor's contribution to border killings. We have covered only the north-western borderlands of Bangladesh and intend to extend this research project to additional border areas in future.

Last, this study has important implications. Bangladesh and India could cooperate on cross-border issues and initiate comprehensive development programmes to improve the quality of life and livelihoods of the people living on both sides of the borderlands. The governments of Bangladesh and India could profitably share knowledge and expertise in order to develop cross-border cooperation. Of course, political willingness to resolve the issue of border killings is of immense significance. Bangladesh and India could come forward with openness, farsightedness, good will and transparency to settle the issue of border killings. The peaceful resolution of the problem of border killings would perhaps be a catalyst to improve further the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and India.

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